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Character and Circumstances

Abstract: *In the tradition of virtue ethics, moral wrongdoing at work and elsewhere is explained in terms of weakness of character. On this view, a person who prioritizes self-interest over client interest and engages in other kinds of moral transgressions exposes him- or herself to be someone of dubious moral character. A response within this tradition to ethical scandals in business has been to call for authentic leadership, exercised by individuals who consistently embody firmness of character. Experimental studies in social and moral psychology have put the virtue ethical assumptions regarding moral wrongdoing under pressure, suggesting that circumstances affect decision-making and conduct to a high degree. An empirically oriented ethics in organizations should take into account that character and circumstances both affect conduct. When morally questionable behaviour in professions and organizations are exposed, it will not be enough to kick the culprits out and substitute them with morally clean and authentic individuals. Earmarking leadership for morally strong and authentic individuals may be a futile endeavour. Circumstances, often in the shape of incentives and decision-making structures, are significant causes of wrongdoing, and revising them appears to be the most promising measure to create responsible and fair organizations.*

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Professionals and other individuals in organizations face decisions all along the scale from real to false moral dilemmas. In some cases, it can be a struggle to decide what is the morally right or the least morally wrong option, since all available options involve the sacrifice of something of considerable moral importance. In other cases, it is obvious to the decision-maker what he or she should do from a moral point of view, but it is tempting to do something else, since it would enhance self-interest in some way. The financial advisor needs another big sale before Monday's meeting with her supervisor, and the client who just walked in the door is both rich and blind to economic realities.

As a client, customer, or patient, you hope that the professional will provide advice based on what is in your best interest, and not in the professional's own interest. In this chapter, I explore two alternative approaches to what that hope of experiencing responsible conduct in organizations can build upon. The first approach maintains that the foundation for such conduct is the decision-makers' character: Professionals and their leaders need consistently to embody principles of integrity, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness in order to behave decently at work (Kiel, 2015). When a person fails or struggles to live in accordance with these principles, it is a sign of personal moral weakness. That person needs to work on his or her moral constitution, or alternatively find work elsewhere, in positions where the personal moral shortcomings cannot be harmful in the sense of leading to serious moral wrongdoing. The second approach claims that we should be less concerned about character, and more about the circumstances the professional works under. A range of studies in social psychology document that aspects of the situation have a strong impact on whether a person engages in moral misconduct or not. The social environment affects decision-making and conduct to a stronger degree than what the character perspective acknowledges.

Virtue ethics has identified the central individual factor concerning ethical decision-making to be a person's moral character, or set of stable and reliable virtues. A person of strong character can withstand temptations to engage in wrongdoing, while a person of weak character is unreliable in this sense. In recent years, virtue ethics has influenced significant developments in ethics in organizations as well as leadership studies, in the aftermath of scandals of moral wrongdoing in companies. Concerned scholars and practitioners have responded to the widespread examples of immoral behaviour amongst leaders and professionals

by promoting ideals of authentic leadership (Gardner et al. 2011). One basic assumption in this research field is that great leadership requires great character (Kiel, 2015). On this view, the leaders need consistently to embody virtuous character traits in their everyday dealings with employees and other stakeholders. By doing so they can serve as good role models in their organizations and contribute to making responsible conduct the normal way to behave in the workplace. Kiel (2015) also suggests that leaders of morally strong character generate more income to their companies. However, the causal relation may also go the other way. The study in question documents that companies with leaders who are perceived to be morally strong outperform those with leaders who are perceived to be morally weak, but it may be easier to embody virtuous character traits when you are in charge of a successful company rather than a struggling one where you can have economic incentives to cut corners.

The concept of authenticity has ancient roots, and is integral to the Socratic notion of knowing yourself. An authentic person is someone with a high degree of self-awareness, who acts in accordance with his true self by expressing what he genuinely thinks and believes. Aristotle defined self-realization and well-being – *eudaimonia* – as a state of happiness where the person acts and lives in accordance with who he really is. Crucially constitutive of *eudaimonia* is the exercise of virtues. Only people who possess virtues like courage, honesty, and loyalty will truly flourish and be happy in the *eudaimonian* sense. To be a virtuous person is to have a certain kind of mindset, a deeply entrenched set of dispositions to act in a particular manner. A truly honest person does not tell the truth out of blind habit, because it is the best way to make a good impression on others, or out of fear of the consequences of being caught in a lie. Rather, the honest person thinks that “it is the truth” is a particularly strong – if not always overriding – reason for speaking the truth. Similarly, a virtuous doctor considers “this is the right treatment for my patient” to be a particularly strong reason for providing that particular treatment to the patient, overriding self-interest and other considerations.

Virtue can come in degrees. Aristotle distinguished between full virtue, where an honest person tells the truth without experiencing any trace of a contrary temptation to lie, and less than full virtue where the person telling the truth has to overcome a desire to do otherwise. The latter is also an honest person, as long as his reasons for telling the truth are not opportunistic, but based on a conviction that telling the truth is

the morally right option. Immanuel Kant considered the act of overcoming one's desires to do the right thing to be more praiseworthy than acts where there was full harmony between reason and inclination, and the decision-maker could behave correctly without inner struggle.

Various accounts of authentic leadership share with virtue ethics an assumption about firmness of character. How will the leader respond to an opportunity to earn quick money by acting against his moral convictions? The standard answer from virtue ethics is that it depends on the stability and robustness of leader's character. If he is an authentic leader, or so the contributors to this field of research argue, internal moral standards will guide his decisions and conduct, and he will thus not give in to temptation.

Empirical research in social psychology indicates that the character-oriented approach has underestimated how circumstances affect decision-making. Aspects of the situation often appear to override character in affecting a person's response to a moral challenge. A range of experiments has demonstrated that circumstances influence what people actually do when they face a moral test (Alderman 1972; Isen 1987; Baron 1997), and Doris (2002) has outlined how these studies indicate the need for a more empirically informed ethics.

The Good Samaritan experiment, designed and executed by Darley and Batson at Princeton University, provides material for one of the most notable studies on character and circumstances (Darley and Batson, 1973). Theology students were individually told to walk to another part of campus, in order to do a presentation on The Good Samaritan story from the Bible. One third of the students were told that they needed to hurry up to get to the building in time, another third that they were just on time, and the final third that they were early and had plenty of time. On the way to the other building, the students encountered a person lying on the pavement in pain, needing assistance, in parallel with the actual Good Samaritan story. The researchers wanted to test whether the differences in the students' hurry to reach the other building would make a difference to their helping behaviour. If character is the most influential factor, then there should be only minor differences. In the experiment, only 10% of the students in a hurry offered to help, 45% of students who were on time and 63% of those who were early made helping initiatives to the person in pain (Darley and Batson, 1973, p. 105). The results indicate that circumstances have a strong influence on conduct, and may have more predictive power than character.

Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) set up an experiment to test whether moral reminders would affect cheating amongst students. A total of 229 students participated. They were asked to perform math tasks, and were given opportunities to cheat when reporting on the results of their individual performances. Before the test, the respondents were asked to write down either the names of ten books they had read in high school (no moral reminder) or the Ten Commandments (moral reminder). The outcome was that the respondents in the first group of students showed normal cheating behaviour, while all the respondents in the second group refrained from cheating. Evoking the Ten Commandments served as a moral reminder, and eliminated cheating. Even this study provides support to the view that circumstances can have a more profound influence on conduct than character. It also gives us reasons to be optimistic about the effects of encouraging people to think about ethics and values. Some of the participants in my ethics training sessions report that they have taken photocopies of the Navigation Wheel and distributed them amongst colleagues. It seems that such an initiative can serve a positive purpose beyond being a tool for ethical analysis. Seeing the Wheel on one's desk or on the wall in the office may serve as a modest reminder of the normative dimensions of decision-making, and as such be a circumstantial component in a work environment where you expect people to behave responsibly. The cognitive purpose of the Wheel and similar tools is to assist analysis of complex situations, while it appears that the emotional purpose can be to serve as moral reminders.

The character approach to moral wrongdoing advises organizations to identify, recruit, and develop people with particularly firm moral character. These will be the people to trust in morally critical and demanding situations. The alternative circumstance approach suggests that a more realistic scenario is one where organizations choose their leaders from a pool of people who are neither particularly good nor particularly bad at coping with moral challenges. They are likely to be ordinary people, vulnerable to ambiguity, uncertainty, and temptation in their decision-making. The leaders will encounter situations where they experience moral doubt and confusion, and can face moral dilemmas where there is no harmonious way out. Something of moral value will have to give way. They can also face temptations to act against their own moral convictions. In such critical situations, it can be useful for leaders to possess knowledge from moral psychology about the circumstances and processes that can lead people to act in opposition to their beliefs about right and wrong.

Tension between a character and a circumstance approach to wrongdoing has also been a feature in criminology and the alternative explanations of why people commit crimes. From a character perspective, criminals have been understood to be fundamentally different from ordinary people. Their lawbreaking activities are interpreted as proof that they are somehow morally and socially defective. In many cases, criminals are branded as “insane, inadequate, immoral, impulsive, egocentric” despite a lack of evidence to support such assumptions (Coleman, 1989, p. 200). Criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957) developed an alternative model for understanding criminal activities, claiming that the criminals were committed to more or less the same moral standards and norms as their fellow non-criminal citizens. The main difference was that the criminals had managed to convince themselves that breaking the law was actually acceptable, through processes of what the researchers called moral neutralization. Initially, they may have been morally ill at ease at the thought of breaking into other people’s homes, but gradually they were able to justify to themselves that it was acceptable to do so after all. Through interviews with juvenile delinquents, Sykes and Matza identified how individuals in this group used moral neutralization techniques to distance themselves from their original misgivings. In the next chapter, I argue that ethics in organizations can benefit from adopting a parallel way of understanding wrongdoing. By doing so it can move beyond a simplistic call for authentic leadership and firm character, and instead supplement the character approach with an emphasis on how one can shape an organizational culture to be alert against attempts to neutralize moral dissonance and thereby normalize questionable behaviour.



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